DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 178 909 CS 205 229

AUTHOR Pedersen, Elray L.
TITLE Frontiers of Sentence-Combining Research.
PUB DATE Oct 79
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association (33rd, Albuquerque, NM, October 18-20, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Composition (Literary); *Educational Research; Elementary Secondary Education; *Research Needs; *Sentence Combining; *Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

Sentence combining (SC) training has been found to consistently stimulate improvement in the syntactic fluency and overall quality of student writing. However, it remains to be established whether SC training also consistently improves the grammatical fluency, the semantic fluency, the conceptual fluency, and the logical fluency of student writing. Affirmative findings derived from investigations of these issues would be considered adequate for concluding that SC training is a highly powerful, broadly influential tool for improving the writing of students. (Author/AEA)

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FRONTIERS OF SENTENCE-COMBINING RESEARCH

Elray L. Pedersen
Weber State College
Ogden, Utah

Ten years ago the National Council of Teachers of English published John Mellon's Transformational Sentence-combining, a study which tested the effectiveness of sentence-combining exercises (SCE's) as tools to improve student writing (10). Mellon's study demonstrated that students who practice specific language manipulation exercises significantly improve the syntactic fluency or structural maturity of their writing.

Four years later, in 1973, the NCTE published a second research report, Frank O'Hare's Sentence-combining, which demonstrated that SCE's improve the overall quality as well as the syntactic fluency of student writing (14).

In the decade following Mellon's initial successful use of sentence-combining training in the classroom, nearly a dozen other studies have reaffirmed the major findings of Mellon and O'Hare (19, 12, 6, 16, 3, 15, 1, 18, 17, 5, 20).

Although the above studies consistently report positive research results, several major questions relating to the effectiveness of sentence-combining practice have not been investigated yet. The following discussion sketches briefly five general areas of writing effectiveness which must be investigated if sentence-combining training is to be widely adopted as a broadly influential tool of writing improvement.

One problem that SC researchers of the 1980's need to investigate is suggested by Christensen (2) and Moffett (11). They ask, "Is it possible that sentence-combining practice will stimulate student writing that is too detailed, too

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structurally complex, writing that is composed of sentences which are too intricate and too long?" Whether extended practice in sentence-combining will generate excessive growth in syntactic fluency is not known, although at present the means for testing this question have been well developed.

Researchers, for example, have previously established a way to measure syntactic fluency by use of Hunt's t-unit procedures (A t-unit is a single main clause and all other modifiers, 8). Researchers have also established syntactic fluency growth levels for all grades of school children and for skilled adult writers (13, 7, 8). And what is most important, researchers have demonstrated through delayed post-testing that extra, achieved growth in syntactic fluency, induced through sentence-combining, is self-sustaining and permanent, not temporary (3,4,15,18). But whether short, extended, intensive periods of sentence-combining practice ultimately lead to complex, overloaded student sentences is not known.

A second question researchers of the 1980's will have to address is whether sentence-combining practice actually improves the grammatical fluency of student writing. Here grammatically fluent writing is defined as structurally correct writing, writing which is free from spelling, punctuation and mechanical errors.

Because teachers, parents, the general public and publishers have long demanded that writing be grammatically correct, researchers ought to develop teaching strategies that can be shown to foster and enhance grammatical fluency in student writing. Sentence-combining practice appears to have such a potential (9). If researchers can show that sentence-combining practice consistently influences students to avoid sentence fragments, run-on sentences and dangling modifiers, in addition to helping students use parallel structure, proper subordination and proper verb and pronoun forms, then an additional justification for the adoption of SC practice into public school curriculum will be established. Strategies that reduce grammatical errors and increase effective expression are long overdue in the classroom.

A third area for future sentence-combining investigations is the semantic fluency of student writing. Semantic fluency here refers to the effective expression of meaningful student content, including the perception, the storage and the integration of expressed student meaning.

Flat, boring student papers which lack insight, concrete details, adequate development and sharp, meaningful expression are too frequently the reading diet of teachers of composition. Such compositions are not written by students who have no meaning to express. On the contrary, every human being alive feels and experiences meaning. But very few humans ever get to the point in their lives that they can evoke their meaningful thoughts and experiences and express them in writing.

It has been hypothesized that sentence-combining practice actually equips students with the linguistic capability to break out of their molds, to express in words and fluent sentences what they feel, experience and think.

Nearly ten years ago, for example, Kellogg Hunt (8) speculated that sentence-combining training could very easily cause student writers to attend to, to store and to express more meaning in their sentences than untrained writers will do, suggesting that sentence-combining training may have a significant effect upon psychological "chunking." Hunt writes, "...as the mind matures it organizes information more intricately and so can produce and receive more intricately organized sentences (p. 58)."

Preliminary research (15) indicates that Hunt's speculation is valid. In the above study, students exposed to SCE's appeared to perceive and to produce more meaningful content in their writing than did comparable control students who did not engage in sentence-combining practice. In addition, O'Hare (14) speculated that students in his study, wrote more detailed, more precisely developed papers with improved content, greater meaning, in them as a result of their exposure to sentence-combining practice. Initial research (15) in this area also supports

the claim of O'Hare, but much more investigation into the area of improved semantic fluency needs to take place. In particular a single general measure of semantic fluency, such as the t-unit measure of syntactic fluency, needs to be developed for meaningful research to take place.

A fourth area for future SC research is the conceptual fluency of student writing. Here the term conceptual fluency refers to competent formulation and expression of ideas and generalizations in student writing. Conceptual fluency includes, of course, not only the use of subordinate and superordinate words, but also subordinate and superordinate hierarchies for the expression of experiences, ideas, thoughts and generalizations.

Composition teachers recognize poor conceptualization quite readily, but they are ill-equipped to measure significant or inadequate conceptualization. A student who does research in the library and then concludes that "in the United states today there are no poor people" obviously has failed to define his terms and find relevant facts relating to his topic. But how does a teacher or even a researcher place a numerical value upon a poorly conceptualized word or statement written by a student? And does sentence-combining practice elicit better student conceptualization? Only good, solid research will answer these questions.

A final suggestion for sentence-combining research in the 1980's is investigating how to stimulate the development of logical fluency in student writing. Here logical fluency refers to the use of appropriate words and sentences to define relationships between and among words and sentences.

Research (15) has shown that students who engage in sentence-combining practice exhibit highly significant growth in logical fluency as measured by a semantic differential test, but specific ways in which student writing becomes more logical have not yet been identified. Nor have specific types of logical processes been the focus of sentence-combining exercises.

Perhaps I can summarize the frontiers of sentence-combining research of the next decade by using an analogy. Suppose we wanted to build a car to race in the

Indianapolis 500. To successfully build a car to perform well at Indy, to design a car to perform well under all the stresses placed upon it as it travels around the 2½ mile oval track would require engineers and technologists who would design on paper what they wanted the car to do on the track. Technological engineers would calculate weights, figure stresses and determine maximum and minimum limits for parts and systems. Then, the car having been conceived of by technicians with specific performance plans in mind, the car would be built of the finest materials available. Once constructed, the car would be put on the track to see what it actually could do in the race.

So it is with sentence-combining practice in the schoolroom. Highly qualified, specialized technologists must determine on paper what they want SCE's to accomplish in the classroom. Then they must develop and use the best language materials available to construct sentence-combining activities. These materials would constitute the sentence-combining curriculum.

But in order for any of the necessary sentence-combining research to take place in the 1980's, we must have highly skilled, trained, dedicated technicians who are willing to spend time designing and constructing the finest sentence-combining materials available for the classroom. These materials must not only be aimed at improving the areas of effective writing which I have sketched. Rather, the materials must be shown to actually significantly improve the writing performance of students in the classroom. Only then can widespread adoption of broadly influential sentence-combining exercises be a major part of a writing curriculum in the public schools.

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